

Panhandlers a tricky problem for law enforcement, legislators

Work group looks to other jurisdictions for best practices to help needy

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Law enforcement officials say they have little means of addressing the growing problem of panhandlers in the county.

The county has launched a work group to look at the issue of roadside solicitation, comprised of police, county officials and residents. The group has been meeting monthly since January and will work on developing recommendations to offer to County Executive Isiah Leggett. It was launched when members of the Wheaton Urban District Advisory Committee wrote to Leggett last July, asking the executive to create the task force in response to panhandlers in Wheaton and across the county.

"In my 25 years, it's increasingly become more — years ago, you didn't see people begging and panhandling in the street," said Montgomery County police assistant chief Betsy Davis, who sits on the work group. "Over the years it's become more prevalent on street corners."

Panhandling is legal in Montgomery County unless the panhandlers act aggressively or block traffic, according to police.

"This obviously does cause some concern for the community — we get calls usually about panhandlers in the middle of an intersection or on a traffic island," said Capt. Russ Hamill, commander of the 2nd District police station.

But since panhandling is legal, Hamill said, until the work group recommends a new approach, law enforcement officials are "left between a rock and a hard place," he said.

"It does cause us concern, but it would require legislative change for us to do anything," Hamill said.

Whether or not to impose further restrictions on panhandlers — or require them to obtain permits to solicit money along the side of road — has been the source of debate.

Davis said the group is learning about approaches of different jurisdictions, including the City of Gaithersburg, which restricts panhandling in roadway medians. But she said enforcing such an ordinance could prove tricky. If panhandlers were required to obtain

permits or if it were to be made illegal in certain circumstances, violations would be difficult to enforce, she said.

"If we ran to every call and locked everyone up, we'd be in central processing all day," she said.

Davis stressed that the workgroup was still in the "listening" phase. She said she hoped to task a summer intern with gathering research about approaches to panhandling from jurisdictions across the country.

"I don't want to rush into making any of these decisions — we're trying to listen to see what the best practices are," she said.

Sen. Jamie Raskin (D-Dist. 20) of Takoma Park said he introduced legislation in 2009 that would have required roadside solicitors to go through a permitting process and to undergo traffic safety training. He introduced the bill, which did not pass, after being approached by community groups with safety concerns about panhandlers approaching drivers at intersections.

Raskin said that enforcement of the proposed bill might have been an issue.

But he said, "Every law including law against murder are difficult to enforce. That doesn't mean we should simply give up the effort."

County Councilmember George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park, also on the work group, said that approaching the problem in the best way will require extensive outreach to connect those in need to services.

"As a legislator, I believe the effect of legislation is limited," Leventhal said. "I would rather address the root causes of the problem."

Mental health and addiction issues may also come into play, and many panhandlers may be feeding drug and alcohol addictions and unwilling to be connected with services, advocates say.

Finding funding for extensive outreach programs could also prove difficult, Leventhal said.

But the bottom line, according to advocates, is for residents to resist the urge to give panhandlers money and direct their donations to local outreach services.

"If people didn't give, they wouldn't be out there," Hamill said.

